

Throwing the bones: superstition or sophisticated information technology?



ThoughtFormz – the art of engineering thought for the future
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A wealth of knowledge resources from Africa has been overlooked. Colonial ideas have reduced many valuable information technologies like African divination systems to mere primitive superstition. ThoughtFormz facilitators, Steve Banhegyi and Andre Croucamp, argue that African divination systems are actually sophisticated information technologies that are used to access, organize and visualise complex systems.

Through a stimulating, interactive workshop they provide participants with firsthand experience of how techniques inspired by African divination can be an aid to critical and creative thinking and equip contemporary problem solvers to deal with information and knowledge in complex systems.

Through the random configuration of meaningful symbolic objects divination technologies initiate cognitive processes that access information, break limiting thought patterns and generate new ideas and associations that cannot be generated through 'serious' problem solving processes normally used in business.

Print media, which fixes black letters in a long line onto a white page communicates beliefs about absolute black and white truth or authority, linear cause and effect sequences of events that flow like a sentence, and the timelessness of printed knowledge. On the other hand, because divinatory technologies use the principle of randomness and engage the changing spatial relationships between objects, they encourage beliefs about impermanence, complex changing relationships and the non-linear nature of dynamic information networks. Contrary to popular conceptions of fortune telling, divination is based on the belief that the universe is not predictable, that there is a fundamental unknowability, but countless opportunities to participate in the creation of reality through the interpretation of random experience and the exploration of probability.

Reflected in all techniques of divination is the principle that the real information you need to solve problems lies hidden in the network of relationships between the various people, objects and dynamics that comprise your life. This makes it a dynamic knowledge management tool. Because this information is not always obvious, but exists in the 'spaces between things', it requires some skill and clever technology to access it. Through the use of randomness, divination accesses and organises hidden information that cannot be 'seen' through ordinary thinking. This 'random access' provides an efficient coverage of non-conscious space unhindered by predictable habits and formulas.

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- It encourages diversity as a way of increasing the possible responses to challenges.
- It values alternative perceptions, and opens the user to a constant process of redefining things.
- Existing perceptions are less dogmatic and people are facilitated to be less protective, defensive and possessive over ideas.
- It focuses on creative process rather than on the continued reproduction of preconceived product.
- It links ideas that are seemingly unrelated, arranging old variables in new and innovative ways.
- It potentiates breakthroughs and out-of-the-blue inspiration by allowing entirely new phenomena to arise out of the relationships between the old.

The success of this ThoughtFormz technique led to an invitation to create a participative educational installation at the Urban Futures Exhibition in 2000. It has been used in a variety of settings including scenario planning, innovation workshops, cultural diversity workshops, conflict management and workshops that explore possible futures. Ideally, half a day should be put aside for this exercise. It can be integrated into a full day workshop on creative thinking. During the workshop facilitators will use this technique to deal with challenges specific to your organization.